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# Imagining Richard Wagner

## The Janus Head of a Divided Nation

ELAINE KELLY

Over the course of its turbulent history, the German nation has defined itself time and again in terms of a constructed Other. The Other—depicted variously as a political, ideological, or racial opposition to the existence of the imagined German Self—has served as a common enemy against which the nation can unite, essentially a vehicle for promoting national spirit. Discussing the historically exclusive nature of German nationalism, Christian Joppke observes, “the German concept of nation thus became more like a weapon than a unifying symbol, the property of some but not of others.”<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this is the perception of an enemy within, a construct of nation in which Self and Other are two sides of the same coin. Thomas Mann famously asserted in 1945 that one could not speak of two separate Germanys, an evil one represented by Hitler and a good one that encompassed *Kultur*.<sup>2</sup> Yet as the Cold War progressed, identity-formation processes were dependent on narratives of separate Germanies: Germany as oppressed and oppressor, as perpetrator and jury, and, most obviously as East and West.

The political scientist John Keane notes that “crises are times during which the living do battle for the hearts, minds and souls of the dead,” an observation that is pertinent here.<sup>3</sup> Uniting the various postwar definitions of nation, as intimated by Thomas Mann, was the shared cultural heritage, which inevitably emerged as a focal point in the ideological combat of the Cold War. Amid the abject poverty in Berlin in 1946, an incredulous cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Joppke, “Intellectuals, Nationalism, and the Exit from Communism: The Case of East Germany,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, 2 (1995): 213–41, here 220.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mann, “Germany and the Germans,” in *Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress, 1942–1949* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1963), 47–48.

<sup>3</sup> John Keane, “More Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 204–17, here 204.

correspondent from *Time* magazine revealingly acclaimed the city as “the current theatrical and musical capital of Europe,” noting that “theaters with their roofs blown off and their walls caved in are housing productions ... that would shame a good deal of the stuff shown on Broadway.”<sup>4</sup> Birthdays and anniversaries of Germany’s dead musical luminaries were seized upon as nation-building and propaganda opportunities; in both East and West numerous “commemorative years” (*Gedenkjahre*) and other smaller festivals were organized to honor, and exploit, the pantheon of Germany’s cultural heroes. The 200th anniversary of Bach’s death in 1950 gave rise to a year-long series of festivities; a Beethoven-*Gedenkjahr* to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the composer’s death followed in 1952, and commemorative celebrations for Schubert, Schumann, Mozart, and Handel followed in quick succession.<sup>5</sup>

### The Canon in a Divided Nation

The commitment to the canon by the Soviet and American occupying forces played in their favor by confronting widely held perceptions of both as culturally challenged nations.<sup>6</sup> It also tapped deep into the German psyche; culture, and in particular music, was intrinsic to the German sense of self and national identity. Robert Schumann, for example, observed in 1839: “as Italy has its Naples, France its Revolution, England its Navy, etc., so the Germans have their Beethoven symphonies.”<sup>7</sup> The response to this conviction was strikingly different in East and West Germany. The Americans were adamant that the Third Reich had been no chance occurrence but a product of an innate German chauvinism that was manifest in their attitude

<sup>4</sup> Winthrop Sargeant, “Europe’s Life,” *Time* (21 October 1946): 30, quoted in Elizabeth Janik, *Recomposing Music: Politics and Tradition in Cold War Berlin* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 125.

<sup>5</sup> In her discussion of the ubiquity of musical festivals in postwar Germany, Janik quotes from a 1946 report by the American music officer John Bitter in which he remarks: “the word ‘festival’ usually implies gaiety and happy times. The Germans, however, organize a ‘Fest’ on an even-numbered anniversary of any famous citizen’s birth or death and then drench the public with his works until it cries for help” (ibid., 221).

<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Soviets, Norman M. Naimark quotes a commentator from the period, who observes typical German perceptions of “the backward Russian, whose cultural level was supposed to be so much lower,” in *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 114–15. David Monod describes a similar situation regarding the Americans in *Settling Scores: German Music, De-Nazification and the Americans, 1945–1953* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) and depicts the American cultural drive in Germany as an attempt to “show the Germans that the United States was a vital and enviable musical superpower” (14).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 61. For a recent discussion of music and German identity in the 20th century, see Celia Applegate, “Saving Music: Enduring Experiences of Culture,” *History and Memory* 17, 1/2 (2005): 217–37.

toward their musical heritage. A reoccurrence of war was inevitable unless these basic flaws in the German character were addressed.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the focus in West Germany was on the denationalization of the canon. Radio programs and concerts interspersing German music with compositions from the Allied nations, accompanied by the promotion of non-German performers, aimed to reduce the German certainty about their musical supremacy. David Monod describes American attempts to “attack Nazi sentiments in the music sector by showing the Germans that Americans could sing Wagner better than they.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Bach and Beethoven were no longer discussed in terms of their German heritage but depicted as products of an international humanism, one to which Germany had no greater claim than any other nation.<sup>10</sup>

Denationalization had no role to play in the politics of East Germany. On the contrary the Socialist Unity Party (SED) relied heavily on the exploitation of national pride to validate the state. The SED was keen not to portray the GDR as a brand new entity but to align it instead with the Germanic cultural heritage and to demonstrate its position as the true heir to the riches of Germany’s past. Central to the construct of the socialist German nation was the hypothesis that two parallel strands of society had evolved in Germany, one reactionary and one progressive. The unfolding of the reactionary strand included the rise of capitalism, the abandonment or misappropriation of *Kultur*, and ultimately the atrocities of the Nazi regime. The progressive strand, in contrast, was one that had evolved directly from the ideals of the Enlightenment and found its apotheosis in the socialist society espoused by the SED. As David Bathrick observes, the SED was determined to demonstrate that “socialism, and by extension socialist realist culture in the GDR, was the logical continuation of all that was enlightened, rational, and therefore democratic from Germany’s controversial past.”<sup>11</sup> According to this logic, the Nazis were not a product of the German cultural heritage; they had betrayed it.

This strategy had a dual purpose, serving not only to convince citizens of the validity of a socialist state but also to distinguish the GDR from the Federal Republic in terms of cultural superiority. The cultural environment of the GDR, triumphantly depicted as one that “realizes the conceptions

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<sup>8</sup> The American response to the war is outlined in terms of music in Janik’s *Recomposing Music*, Monod’s *Settling Scores*, and Amy C. Beal’s *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). See also Toby Thacker’s *Music after Hitler, 1945–1955* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Monod, *Settling Scores*, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Monod discusses this in some detail (*ibid.*, 99).

<sup>11</sup> David Bathrick, “*The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 42.

and ideals, the traditions of the humanistic German poets and thinkers,”<sup>12</sup> was, according to the SED, inconceivable in the political circumstances that defined West Germany. In a statement to mark the 200th anniversary of George Friedrich Handel’s death in 1959, the Central Committee of the Party explained:

The politics of the oppression of the peaceful and progressive aspirations of the working classes of West Germany, the nuclear armament of the West German army, and the propagation of openly revanchist territorial claims against other countries in Europe no longer leave a place for the progressive and humane ideas of the great thinkers and artists of our past. The Bonn NATO state is today not only the focal point for the threat of nuclear war in Europe but also the scene of a rapid decline of culture.<sup>13</sup>

The Federal Republic was typically depicted as a cultural wasteland, a breeding ground for fascist aesthetics. Alexander Abusch described it as a state “where the humanistic traditions of the German nation are disregarded as ‘antiquated’ and ‘outmoded’, but the traditions of German-Prussian and Nazi militarism are all the more cherished.”<sup>14</sup> In the eyes of the SED, the FRG was a haven for superficial formalism, cosmopolitanism and, in particular, depraved American cultural imports. Otto Grotewohl characteristically advised GDR citizens of the need to struggle against the spread from the West of a “cultural barbarity” replete with “gangster and slayer movies [*Mörderfilmen*] with unscrupulous sensations, with mysticism, [the] cult of death, and all types of perverse eroticism.”<sup>15</sup>

The credibility of this rhetoric was dependent on the construct of a socialist cultural canon that embodied the Enlightenment ideals promoted by the regime. Goethe and Schiller, together with the triumvirate of Bach, Handel,

<sup>12</sup> “Offener Brief des deutschen Kulturbundes an die westdeutsche Bevölkerung,” *Neues Deutschland* 129 (10 May 1960). Reprinted in Elimar Schubbe, ed., *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED* (Stuttgart: Seewald, 1972), 654. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>13</sup> “Erklärung des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands zum Händel-Gedenkjahr 1959” (dated 17 February 1959), Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (SAPMO) im Bundesarchiv (BA), DY 30/IV 2/9.06/294, 63–64.

<sup>14</sup> “Wir bewahren Schillers humanistisches Erbe für die ganze Nation” (Rede Alexander Abuschs auf dem Festakt zur Schiller-Ehrung in Weimar, 10. November 1959), *Neues Deutschland* 311 (11 November, 1959), in Schubbe, *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED*, 582.

<sup>15</sup> “Die Kunst im Kampf für Deutschlands Zukunft” (Rede Otto Grotewohls zur Berufung der Staatlichen Kommission für Kunstangelegenheiten am 31. August 1951), *Neues Deutschland* 203 (2 February 1951), in Schubbe, *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED*, 206.

and Beethoven, were quickly harnessed to this effect, their biographies and works rapidly reinterpreted to reveal latent socialist tendencies. Bach, for example, was portrayed as an ultimately secular and populist composer whose religious compositions, according to the committee assembled a year prior to his 200th anniversary, were written “simply on account of his job”;<sup>16</sup> whereas Handel, as Pamela Potter has demonstrated, was championed as a hero of the working classes, a fighter in the struggle against the slave trade, colonialism, and, apparently, the suppression of the Irish.<sup>17</sup> The veneration and politicization of Enlightenment culture, one that was mirrored to an extent in the West, has been the subject of much recent attention.<sup>18</sup> Yet perhaps of greater interest is the reception history of figures that presented more complex ideological challenges. Richard Wagner, in particular, was a thorn in the side of the SED for much of the early period of the GDR. Unarguably central to the German myth of *Kultur*, his dubious appropriation by the Nazis did nothing to quash his popularity with the public.<sup>19</sup> Following the successful reopening of Bayreuth in 1951 under the direction of the composer’s grandson Wieland Wagner, the GDR was forced to respond. The resulting portrayal of the composer in the 1950s and early 1960s is a fascinating one, illuminating the impact of the West on the process of identity formation in the GDR and the complexities inherent in reconciling an essentially bourgeois canon with Marxism.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Lars Klingberg, “Politisch fest in unseren Händen”: *Musikalische und musikwissenschaftliche Gesellschaften in der DDR* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1997), 82, and “Nationales Bekenntnis zu Bach: Stellungnahme des Parteivorstandes der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands zum Bach-Jahr, 19 März 1950,” *Einheit* 4 (1950), in Schubbe, *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Pamela Potter, “The Politicization of Handel and His Oratorios in the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and the Early Years of the German Democratic Republic,” *The Musical Quarterly* 85, 2 (2001): 311–41, here 329.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Lothar Ehrlich and Gunther Mai, eds., *Weimarer Klassik in der Ära Ulbricht* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000); Horst Haase, *Die SED und das kulturelle Erbe: Orientierungen, Errungenschaften, Probleme* ([East] Berlin: Dietz, 1986); Wolfram Schlenker, *Das “Kulturelle Erbe” in der DDR: Gesellschaftliche Entwicklung und Kulturpolitik 1945–1965* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> Despite the disastrous state of many opera houses and the shortage of male singers, Wagner made a rapid return to German stages. A production of *Tannhäuser* was performed in Chemnitz in February 1946 and numerous productions of *Tristan* and *Der fliegende Holländer* followed, favored no doubt as a result of their relatively small production requirements. A comprehensive database of Wagner productions in the Soviet-Occupied Zone and the GDR has been compiled by Peter Kupfer and can be accessed at [www.peterkupfer.com/research](http://www.peterkupfer.com/research).

<sup>20</sup> Valuable accounts of Wagner reception in the GDR are provided by Werner P. Seiferth, “Wagner-Pflege in der DDR,” *Richard-Wagner-Blätter: Zeitschrift des Aktionskreises für das Werk Richard Wagners* (Bayreuth) 13, 3–4 (1989): 89–113; and Marion Benz, “Die Wagner-Inszenierungen von Joachim Herz: Studie zur theatralen Wagner-Rezeption in der DDR” (Ph.D. diss., Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1998). See also Eckart

## Wagner in Bayreuth

The problem of Wagner was by no means exclusive to the East. In light of Bayreuth's status as a cultural showcase of the Nazi regime, and Hitler's close personal relationship with Winifred Wagner, the American occupying forces (under whose jurisdiction the theater fell in the immediate postwar period) had serious misgivings about its reopening and were unsurprisingly reluctant to restore it to its original function.<sup>21</sup> The difficulty with the festival lay not only in its wartime history; Bayreuth was the ultimate manifestation of Germanic cultural chauvinism, an expression of the German claims to artistic hegemony that the Americans were so keen to dispel. Wieland Wagner, however, was quick to lay this incarnation of Bayreuth aside. Publicly distancing himself from events of the recent past and from the nationalistic aesthetics that had become entrenched in German productions, his reading of Wagner stripped the repertoire bare to reveal eternal universal myths.<sup>22</sup> Gone were the naturalistic set designs and the traditional fanfare of horses, breastplates, rainbow bridges, castles, and dragons; in their place was an empty stage broken only by symbolic sculptures and experimental lighting techniques. Wieland Wagner eschewed the romantic realism traditionally associated with Wagner and instead explored the implications of the composer's interest in Greek tragedy. His productions experimented with stylized acting, his choruses and actors often communicating directly with the audience rather than with each other. As a number of commentators have pointed out, Wieland Wagner's vision of a postwar Wagner was something of an illusion; Bayreuth in the Third Reich was by no means the bastion of artistic conservatism that it was later assumed to be, and Wieland himself had launched his experimental pared-down Wagner in Altenburg during the war.<sup>23</sup> Yet the

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Kröplin, "Aufhaltsame Ankunft und ahnungsvoller Abschied: Der *Ring* in der DDR," *Wagnerspectrum*, no. 1 (2006): 63–110; Joachim Herz, "Anmerkung zum Beitrag von Eckart Kröplin über den *Ring* in der DDR," *Wagnerspectrum*, no. 1 (2007): 171–73; and Eckart Kröplin, "Entgegnung von Eckart Kröplin auf die Einwände von Joachim Herz," *Wagnerspectrum*, no. 1 (2007): 174–75.

<sup>21</sup> A comprehensive account of Bayreuth in the postwar period is provided in Frederic Spotts, *A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). A more specific discussion of American plans for Bayreuth in the immediate postwar years can be found in Sabine Henze-Döhring, "Kulturelle Zentren in der amerikanischen Besatzungszone: Der Fall Bayreuth," in *Kulturpolitik im besetzten Deutschland 1945–1949*, ed. Gabriele Clemens (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1994), 39–54. David Monod also explores the implications of Bayreuth for the Americans in *Settling Scores*, 253–60.

<sup>22</sup> Wieland Wagner's aesthetics and production style are discussed at length in Patrick Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 261–309.

<sup>23</sup> As Carnegie explains, Hitler's personal interest in Bayreuth and subsequent protection of it from the Nazis' cultural ideology commission enabled the director Emil Preetorius and the conductor Heinz Tietjen to introduce Germany's most experimental Wagner productions during the Third Reich (*Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 272–80). Regarding



rancor that “Neu”-Bayreuth incurred among hardcore supporters of German nationalism, and its clear commitment to internationalism, served to offset any concerns.<sup>24</sup> Wieland’s construction of Neu-Bayreuth as something of a zero hour in Wagner reception, and his transformation of the composer into a symbol of the nascent West, embracing the aesthetics and ideals of a new Europe, was excellent propaganda for the Western powers.

Wagner’s ideological place in the canon of the GDR raised some difficult questions. His early revolutionary years were certainly conducive to a socialist reading, and in the past he had enjoyed the support of left-wing enthusiasts ranging from George Bernard Shaw to Anatolii Lunacharskii.<sup>25</sup> The course of Wagner’s life after 1848, however, was far more problematic. His increasingly bourgeois lifestyle and his embrace of Schopenhauerian philosophy, in particular the advocacy of redemption through death, could not easily be reconciled with aspects of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. Yet the East Germans were understandably reluctant to blacklist a composer with such widespread public appeal. As Stephan Stompor observed in a review of the 1954 Dessau production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, “[the performance] proves that we are not willing to relinquish even the smallest part of our humanistic cultural legacy, not even the extremely contradictory and hotly debated *Ring*.”<sup>26</sup> Central to the SED’s anti-fascist narrative of reactionary and progressive strands of culture in the early 1950s was Georg Lukács’s polarization of rationalism and irrationalism as the intellectual constituents of socialism and capitalist fascism respectively.<sup>27</sup> Locating the origins of socialism clearly in the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Lukács traced an antithetical line from the irrationalism of the romantic school through Schopenhauer, the late romantics, and Nietzsche to fascism, a hypothesis that was validated for many

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Wieland Wagner’s Altenburg *Ring* production of 1946, he notes that the job was acquired with Goebbels’s help (282) For further discussions of Wieland Wagner’s activities during the war, see Henze-Döhring, “Kulturelle Zentren in der amerikanischen Besatzungszone: der Fall Bayreuth,” 48–49.

<sup>24</sup> Monod, *Settling Scores*, 258.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, G. B. Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung’s Ring* (1898); Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Frank Trommler, “The Social Politics of Musical Redemption,” in *Re-Reading Wagner*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 119–35; and Gottfried Wagner, “Richard Wagner als Kultfigur ‘rechter’ und ‘linker’ Erlösungsideologien,” in *Von der Romantik zur ästhetischen Religion*, ed. Leander Kaiser and Michael Ley (Munich: Fink, 2004), 71–88.

<sup>26</sup> Stephan Stompor, “Richard Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen* in Dessau,” *Musik und Gesellschaft* (hereafter *MuG*) 4, 7 (1954): 268–69, here 269.

<sup>27</sup> This theory found its ultimate exposition in Lukács’s *Destruction of Reason* (1952) but was manifest in earlier works such as *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and *The Young Hegel* (1938). On Lukács’s impact on intellectual thought in the GDR, see Caroline Gallée, *Georg Lukács: Seine Stellung und Bedeutung im literarischen Leben der SBZ/DDR* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1996).



left-wing intellectuals by the role allocated to figures such as Wagner in Nazi Germany. This had a significant impact on the reception of romantic literature, and during the first two decades of the state's existence, romanticism was essentially a taboo topic. Novalis, Schlegel, and Tieck were confined to the backwaters of history until the 1970s,<sup>28</sup> and so-called late romantics such as Nietzsche remained out in the cold well into the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> Yet Lukács's narrative of the past by no means precluded Wagner from the socialist canon. The importance he placed on 19th-century realists such as Balzac in his construction of the socialist canon allowed for a broad reading of the classical humanistic tradition<sup>30</sup> and created a bridge between bourgeois and Marxist art that was particularly useful for the popular-front politics prevalent in the early fragile days of the GDR.<sup>31</sup> Despite his tarnished reputation, Wagner's cultural currency was such that the pragmatic East-German government was not prepared to surrender him to the West—and certainly not to Bayreuth, which was firmly re-establishing itself as the composer's geographic, historical, and spiritual home.

### Dessau: "Bayreuth of the North"

In 1953, the GDR responded to the challenge posed by Bayreuth with an Eastern alternative in the guise of the *Richard-Wagner-Festwoche* in Dessau. The theater in Dessau, which was bombed during the war and reopened under the directorship of Willi Bodenstein in 1949, had already established itself as a center for Wagner performance: Bodenstein staged *Tannhäuser* and *Der fliegende Holländer* in 1950 and *Die Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin* in 1951 and 1952, respectively.<sup>32</sup> The inaugural government-sponsored festival in 1953, which launched the theater's first production of the *Ring*,<sup>33</sup> deepened this commitment to the composer, earning the festival the sobriquet "Bayreuth of the North."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, given that the theater in Dessau was a repertory

<sup>28</sup> See, in particular, Gerda Heinrich, *Geschichtsphilosophische Positionen der deutschen Frühromantik (Friedrich Schlegel und Novalis)* ([East] Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> David Bathrick, "The Powers of Speech," 193–217.

<sup>30</sup> See, in particular, Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1937) and *German Realists in the 19th Century* (1951).

<sup>31</sup> Walter Ulbricht set a precedent in 1945 with his dictate for winning the populace over to socialism: "It is essential that one tell the youth something first about the role of the Prussian military and the lies of the Nazis. Then one must begin to familiarize them with German literature, with Heine Goethe, Schiller, etc. Not starting with Marx and Engels! They wouldn't understand that" (quoted in Manfred Jäger, *Kultur und Politik in der DDR 1945–1990: Ein historischer Abriss* [Cologne: Edition Deutschland Archiv, 1995], 20).

<sup>32</sup> *Festbuch der 2: Richard-Wagner-Festwochen Dessau 1954*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> This was the second *Ring* production to take place in the GDR. The first one had been produced in Rostock; see Stompor, "Richard Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen* in Dessau," 268.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Nora Eckert, *Der Ring des Nibelungen und seine Inszenierungen von 1876 bis 2001* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 193.

one, and the festival, unlike the one in Bayreuth, had to fit around and draw resources from the standard season program, the focus on Wagner was striking. By 1958, Bodenstein had already staged two full runs of Wagner's operas from the *Flying Dutchman* through to *Götterdämmerung* and one production each of *Rienzi* and *Parsifal*.<sup>35</sup> The 1958 *Festwoche* itself included 3 more works than the Bayreuth festival that year, offering 12 performances of 10 different works in the space of two weeks.<sup>36</sup>

As the undisputed epicenter of Wagner reception in the GDR in the mid-1950s, the *Festwoche* provided cultural leaders with a much-needed forum to mold a Wagner for the East.<sup>37</sup> From the outset, Dessau aimed to rival Bayreuth not just in terms of the sheer number of performances but also in terms of its mission. At its most fundamental level, the *Festwoche* offered a people's alternative to Bayreuth. Early criticisms of Bayreuth in the GDR press focused heavily on its exclusive, capitalistic climate. Ernst Krause, for example, reporting on the 1951 festival in *Musik und Gesellschaft*, described scathingly a musically ignorant audience being ferried to Bayreuth in "eight-seater, double-chauffeured Cadillacs." Acknowledging that "the people who can afford the steep admission charge of 30 to 50 Westmark are surely not all snobs," Krause lamented that still "they are not the true Wagner friends and equally not the people [*Volk*] that the master wanted to introduce to art." He concluded that "the great common cause of the Bayreuth festival requires different friends."<sup>38</sup> Dessau, in contrast, prided itself on its accessibility. Upon assuming the role of the theater's directorship, Bodenstein laid out his intentions to transform it "from a court theater to a people's theater."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the *Richard-Wagner-Festwoche* aimed to offer accessible productions to "a new public, the workers and peasants and members of the productive intelligentsia of our republic."<sup>40</sup>

Bodenstein's construction of Dessau as the socialist antithesis to a capitalist Bayreuth was symptomatic of a wider current underlying early attempts to shape Wagner reception in the GDR. Mirroring the East-West polarity of Dessau and Bayreuth, many commentators adopted a dual-level approach to Wagner, one that mapped the contradictions of his philosophical outlook and reception history across the ideological and geographic paradigms of East

<sup>35</sup> Seiferth, "Wagner-Pflege in der DDR," 98.

<sup>36</sup> Dieter Kranz, "Festspielhaus oder sozialistisches Theater?" *Theater der Zeit* (hereafter *TdZ*) 13, 7 (1958): 16–20, here 20.

<sup>37</sup> A fact helped, Seiferth points out, by the absence in the 1950s of suitable venues for opera performances in larger towns such as Leipzig, Halle, and Magdeburg ("Wagner-Pflege in der DDR," 97).

<sup>38</sup> Ernst Krause, "Quo vadis, Bayreuth?" *MuG* 1, 8 (1951): 23–24.

<sup>39</sup> See, in particular, the booklet outlining the aims of the theater that was issued upon its reopening in 1949: *Vom Hoftheater zum Volkstheater* (Dessau: Dessau Anhaltisches Landestheater, 1949).

<sup>40</sup> *Festbuch der 2: Richard-Wagner-Festwochen Dessau 1954*, 8.

and West. That Wagner's revolutionary years could be traced to locations in the GDR and his later reactionary stance to West Germany provided a useful basis for this strategy. Joachim Weinert declared in *Musik und Gesellschaft* in 1953: "Bayreuth is the historical location of the late Wagner, who struck up with a compromised world, which is not our world anymore. The places of activity of the young revolutionary Wagner are situated with us."<sup>41</sup> This narrative formed the basis for an image of Wagner with implications far beyond the confines of the opera house. Wagner emerged as a Janus head, a metaphor for the divided German nation beset by opposing reactionary and progressive forces: capitalism and socialism, fascism and anti-fascism.

### De-Nazification, Antifascism, and Nationalism

These polarities came strongly into play in discussions of Neu-Bayreuth, which was painted as the epicenter of the reactionary Wagner tradition and by implication a manifestation of the imperialist-capitalist Western spirit. This construction of Bayreuth was particularly important in light of the disparate production styles of East and West. Notably, the "progressive" Wagner championed by Bodenstein and his colleagues remained heavily entrenched in the naturalistic realism of prewar Germany. Eckert, for example, describes the extreme conservatism of the Dessau *Ring* production of 1954, epitomized by "naturalistic atmospheric stage designs."<sup>42</sup> This adherence to tradition reflects not only Bodenstein's innate conservatism but also, on a deeper level, wider ideological concerns. In the program for the 1954 Wagner *Festwoche*, Bodenstein admitted the need to free Wagner from the "misinterpretations and falsifications of fascism."<sup>43</sup> This involved, however, neither modernizing him nor stripping him of generations of tradition; on the contrary, one was simply obliged to "respect the will of the Master!" (*Den Willen und das Wollen des Meisters achten!*).<sup>44</sup> Neu-Bayreuth's zero-hour revival of Wagner, essentially a de-Nazification of the composer, did not sit comfortably with anti-fascist doctrine. Composers belonging to the progressive socialist canon were outside the trajectory of fascism and thus needed simply to be rescued in the wake of the war, not rehabilitated or cleansed.<sup>45</sup> Anything resembling

<sup>41</sup> Joachim Weinert, "Bayreuth in neuem Licht," *MuG* 3, 10 (1953): 382–84, here 384.

<sup>42</sup> Eckert, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 195–96.

<sup>43</sup> *Festbuch der 2: Richard-Wagner-Festwochen Dessau 1954*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Willi Bodenstein, "Richard Wagners erste revolutionäre Kunsttat," in the program for the *1. Richard-Wagner-Festwoche Dessau*, 1953, 36–37 (quoted in Seiferth, "Wagner-Pflege," 98). Benz likens Bodenstein's reverence for Wagner's wishes to that of Cosima Wagner; see *Die Wagner-Inszenierungen von Joachim Herz*, 27.

<sup>45</sup> A classic case of a composer in need of rescue was Handel, whose oratorio texts had been bowdlerized by Fritz Stein and Hermann Stephani in the Third Reich. The SED were vocal in their demands for the removal of such distortions: "The brutal falsifications of Nazi-fascism in the field of the Handel edition, which are still included in the editions of Stephani and Fritz Stein, must, as has happened in the GDR, be stamped out everywhere; neverthe-

a de-Nazification of Wagner cast doubt on his right to a place in this canon. Thus Wieland Wagner's approach was perceived at best as a failure to understand Wagner in his true context, at worst a continuation of Nazi practices of falsifying and misappropriating art. Particularly pointed in this respect was Werner Wolf's discussion in *Musik und Gesellschaft* of the Bayreuth Festival of 1957, aptly titled "A Cleaning Out or a Violation?":

One does not need to "de-Nazify," but only to perform faithfully; then particularly works such as *Die Meistersinger* and *Der Ring der [sic] Nibelungen* prove their still-undiminished power. When it is said, however, in 1957 in West Germany that Wagner would today represent the "European spirit" (naturally according to the Bonn model), this has the same meaning as the *grossdeutsch* thesis from the year 1939 that Wagner [if he had been alive] at that time would have become a National Socialist.<sup>46</sup>

Wolf's alignment of Nazi Germany with the postwar West and his references to the "European spirit" and Bonn resonate with the broader trend of GDR propaganda during this period, in which World War II was depicted as a forerunner to the Cold War and both were reduced to a communist struggle against an imperialist fascist West hell-bent on destroying the German national spirit. Jeffrey Herf describes a speech given by Walter Ulbricht at a KPD party conference in 1949 that characteristically downplayed the role of the Western allies in the defeat of Hitler, portraying them instead as self-serving fascists: "The American and British war aim had not been the democratization and demilitarization of Germany but 'the destruction of Germany as an independent state.'"<sup>47</sup> In terms of the musical canon, this line of reasoning translated into vivid portrayals of the West demolishing the German people by using their own musical heritage as a weapon against them. Johanna Rudolph, for example, reporting on the Bach conference of 1950, scathingly described American attempts to jazzify Bach, claiming that such efforts were specifically intended to "disparage and humiliate

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less, such editions play a considerable role in contemporary West German performance practice"; see "Aufgaben und Ziele unserer Händelpflege," SAPMO-BA, DY 30/IV 2/9.06/294, 50, prepared by the Central Committee of the SED as part of the commemorative measures to mark the 200th anniversary of Handel's death.

<sup>46</sup> Werner Wolf, "Entrümpelung oder Verwaltung? Bayreuther Festspiele 1957," *MuG* 7, 9 (1957): 534–37, here 537.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Ulbricht, "Warum Nationale Front des demokratischen Deutschland? Aus dem Referat auf der Parteiarbeiterkonferenz der SED Groß-Berlin, 17. Mai 1949," in *Zur Geschichte der Deutschen Arbeiterbewegung: Aus Reden und Aufsätzen*, 3: 1946–50 ([East] Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1954), 488–509, translated and discussed in Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 109.

the German people.”<sup>48</sup> The political misappropriation of the canon by the U.S.–Adenauer regime was a favorite topic of the SED. The party’s “National Declaration for Bach” of 1950 warned that “reactionary powers try also to make use of the memory of the great German composer for their divisive, anti-national purposes.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the official manifesto to celebrate the 125th anniversary of Beethoven’s death in 1952 claimed that “the American cultural barbarians and their lackeys violate the memory of Beethoven in that they misuse Bonn, the city of his birth, for the most pernicious national degradation.”<sup>50</sup>

Wieland Wagner’s political independence precluded him from such barbed accusations, but the abstract symbolism of his productions left him open to standard GDR criticisms of cosmopolitanism, a euphemism for anti-nationalism, among other things. Werner Wolf picked up on this theme elsewhere, writing in *Musik und Gesellschaft* in 1961: “The Bayreuth performances are not only at complete variance with the text and the music, [but they] also deface the works of Wagner anew, as evinced by the catholic and cosmopolitan perversity of [*Die*] *Meistersinger*, the similarly cosmopolitan, non-committal *Ring*, [and] the *Parsifal* wrapped in mystical gloom.”<sup>51</sup> The internationalism of Bayreuth was anathema to the GDR Wagner effort, which, like other celebrations of national culture, played a vital role in the SED’s attempts to convince the intelligentsia of the legitimacy of the GDR as an intrinsically German state rather than as a satellite of the Soviet Union.<sup>52</sup> Thus much was made in the GDR of Wagner’s Germanness. Bodenstein, for example, hailed him as “a great German musician, a patriot and a humanist.”<sup>53</sup> Any parallels to the nationalistic hubris associated with Wagner in the Third Reich raised little official concern; on the contrary, a commitment to a very German construction of Wagner served to underline the SED’s devo-

<sup>48</sup> Johanna Rudolph, “Um das neue Bach-Bild,” *MuG* 2, 1 (1952): 18–19, <<18-19, not 1819, right?>> here 18. Rudolph’s remarks were directed at the popular hit “Bach Goes to Town,” which she translated with ridicule as *Bach geht bummeln* [Bach goes strolling]. The piece is not actually American but by the Welsh composer Alec Templeton.

<sup>49</sup> “Nationales Bekenntnis zu Bach: Stellungnahme des Parteivorstandes der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands zum Bach-Jahr, 19 März 1950,” *Einheit* 4 (1950), in Schubbe, *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED*, 134.

<sup>50</sup> “Zum 125: Todestag Ludwig van Beethovens.” Stellungnahme des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands, März 1952,” *MuG* 2, 3 (1952): 72–74, here 74.

<sup>51</sup> Werner Wolf, “Das Musiktheater und die Leipziger ‘Meistersinger,’” *MuG* 11, 1 (1961): 33–37, here 34.

<sup>52</sup> David Pike notes, for instance, that “by declaring themselves the rightful heirs of the cultural heritage, the Communists hoped to strengthen their rhetorical hand further, contriving additional arguments to refute any contention that their ultimate objective was the importation of Soviet cultural norms into Germany” (*The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945–1949* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993], 178).

<sup>53</sup> *Festbuch der 2: Richard-Wagner-Festwochen Dessau 1954*, 8.

tion to rebuilding the national spirit in the face of Western opposition and to achieve German reunification. Explaining the function of the Dessau festival in the 1954 program, Culture Minister Johannes R. Becher declared: "nothing lies closer to the hearts of our creative artists than championing the unity of German culture and contributing in this way to the preservation of peace and the reunification of our fatherland. I am positive that this sentiment will come alive in all participants during the second Richard Wagner *Festwoche* in Dessau."<sup>54</sup>

Central to this image of Wagner as a figure to unite the German nation was *Die Meistersinger*, acclaimed in the GDR not only as a symbol of German nationalism but also as a proclamation for the SED's vision of the German path to socialism. Politically, *Die Meistersinger* was arguably the most problematic of Wagner's operas following its enthusiastic appropriation by the Nazis.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to other works that had played a prominent role in Nazi Germany, notably Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, its specifically Germanic content rendered it particularly awkward. Wieland Wagner notably waited until 1956 to introduce his interpretation to Bayreuth, and then produced a version devoid of the traditional nationalistic associations, a "Mastersingers without Nuremberg" as it was disparaged by right-wing critics.<sup>56</sup> The SED were not troubled, however, by such concerns. New productions of the opera marked the opening of the Berlin Staatsoper at the newly renovated Unter den Linden opera house in 1955 and the Leipzig opera house in 1960,<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>55</sup> In a speech broadcast globally during the intermission of the *Die Meistersinger* performance that opened the 1933 Bayreuth season, Joseph Goebbels declared: "There is certainly no work in the entire music literature of the German people that is so relevant to our time and its spiritual and intellectual tensions as is Richard Wagner's *Meistersinger*. . . . Of all his music dramas the *Meistersinger* stands out as the most German. It is simply the incarnation of our national identity. In it is contained everything that conditions and inspires the German cultural soul" (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, 7 August 1933, quoted in Spotts, *Bayreuth*, 173 <<Is this *A History of the Wagner Festival*, or some other previously uncited work?>>). The prelude to the opera, and the chorus "Wach auf!" from the final act, provided the backdrop to numerous Nazi party congresses; and the opera formed the centerpiece of the war festivals that were held in place of the usual Bayreuth festival during the years 1940 to 1944 to bolster the spirits of those involved with the war effort. See *ibid.*, <<What is *ibid.*? Spotts?>> 189–211; and Karl A. Zaenker, "The Bedevilled Beckmesser: Another Look at Anti-Semitic Stereotypes in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*," *German Studies Review* 22, 1 (1999): 1–20, here 1.

<sup>56</sup> Spotts, *Bayreuth*, <<*A History of the Wagner Festival?*>> 218–21. Wieland Wagner himself described the opera as "a dangerous mixture of Lortzing [the leading protagonist of 19th-century German comic opera, whose 1840 opera *Hans Sachs* was also based on the *Meistersingers*] and the Reichsparteitag [Reich party congress]"; see Geoffrey Skelton, *Wieland Wagner: The Positive Sceptic* (London: Gollancz, 1971), 134.

<sup>57</sup> Joachim Herz, who directed the Leipzig production, recalls that he did not propose the opera himself. The choice of dedication opera came from on high and was included in the conditions of him assuming the role of director of the opera house. See Ilse Kobán, ed.,



firmly cementing its role in the socialist canon. Regarding the 1955 production, Ernst Krause, reporting in *Musik und Gesellschaft*, declared: "The choice of a festive as well as popular opera by Richard Wagner proved to be a happy one. *The Meistersinger*, which arose in the years of the struggle for the unification of Germany, can be interpreted, particularly now, in terms of an appeal to the nation."<sup>58</sup>

*Die Meistersinger* lent itself well to party doctrine, being by far the most ideologically sound of Wagner's operas. The Schopenhauerian pessimism that pervades his other mature operas is not overt; and there is a marked absence of gods, mysticism, and similar other-worldly elements that were anathema to the aesthetics of Socialist Realism. The opera draws not on myth but on German history and has at its center the German proletariat—tradesmen and their apprentices. From a musical perspective, the hardcore chromaticism of *Tristan* is replaced by a diatonic language that was more acceptable to the cultural aesthetics of the Party. Particularly appealing was the focus in the opera on the superiority of Germanic music, which, most important, is portrayed not as an art of kings and noblemen but as an art of the people. For Marxist musicologists, the opera was an early example of socialist realist art and consequently represented the highpoint of Wagner's achievements. Georg Knepler observed that it is not "a coincidence that *Die Meistersinger*, which contains the fewest ideological inconsistencies, is the most unified and uniform of Wagner's works, one of the greatest masterpieces of the 19th century."<sup>59</sup>

Far more problematic were those operas associated with the Western manifestation of Wagner: *Tristan*, *Parsifal*, and to a lesser extent the *Ring*, whose place in the GDR canon was suspect and depended very much on the conservative aesthetics of the state's opera houses.<sup>60</sup> The absence of innovation in areas of direction or set design allowed supporters of the composer and party opportunists to avoid dwelling on the pessimism and mysticism inherent in these works and to direct attention instead to the music. Hans Mayer, in his 1953 essay on Wagner in *Sinn und Form*, promoted Wagner on the grounds that the strength of his music superseded the more dubious

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Joachim Herz: *Theater—Kunst des erfüllten Augenblicks. Briefe, Vorträge, Notate, Gespräche, Essays* ([East] Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1989), 99.

<sup>58</sup> Ernst Krause, "'Die Weihe des Hauses': Zur Eröffnung der neuen Deutschen Staatsoper Unter den Linden," *MuG* 5, 10 (1955): 306–10, here 308.

<sup>59</sup> Georg Knepler, *Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. ([East] Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1961), 893.

<sup>60</sup> The fact that the *Ring* had been conceived before the Dresden uprisings, and that a significant amount of it was in place before Wagner's encounter with Schopenhauer, provided commentators with some leeway. See, for example, Hans Pischner's reading of it in his tract "*Musik und Revolution*": *Rede über Richard Wagner als 48er Revolutionär gehalten am 22. Juni 1948 in der Wirkungsgruppe Weimar des Kulturbundes zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands* (Weimar: CDU-Verlag, 1948).



aspects of his character, observing that “once the music starts, all recollections of the all-too-human Wagner disappear.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the party hard-liner Walther Siegmund-Schultze argued the case that in Wagner’s operas, it was the music rather than the dramatic content that had value for a socialist society: “In Wagner’s music dramas the music is the most important part. It gives the often dubious texts a realistic message, social impact, and positive ambition. It is wrong to want to interpret too much philosophy from or to insert [too much] into Wagner’s works.”<sup>62</sup> Insights on the non-musical aspects of productions tended to seek out the positive. Eckert, for instance, describes the upbeat consensus in the GDR press that Bodenstein’s 1954 *Ring* was one in which “the optimistic Siegfried tragedy triumphs over the pessimistic Wotan tragedy.”<sup>63</sup> Gerard Dippel, writing about the same production, noted that it is “delightful that with this interpretation of the tetralogy, they have completely abstained from those abstract stage-direction experiments with which they try nowadays in Bayreuth to rejuvenate the Wagnerian music drama.”<sup>64</sup>

### The Infiltration of Bayreuth and Marxist Readings of Wagner

Serious fault lines began to appear in the GDR’s Wagner narrative in the second half of the 1950s as stage productions advanced. Problematically, many of the new ideas introduced came straight off the stage in Bayreuth. The set designer Wolf Hochheim, engaged in 1956 to re-energize the festival in Dessau, made no attempts to disguise his enthusiasm for Wieland Wagner.<sup>65</sup> Nor did those at the helm of the 1956 Berlin Staatsoper’s *Ring* production, the director Erich Witte and the stage designer Heinz Pfeiffenberger. Indeed, Witte, who was also a tenor of international standing, had firsthand experience of the Neu-Bayreuth style, having sung the role of Loge under Wieland Wagner in the 1952 and 1953 Bayreuth *Ring* productions.<sup>66</sup> Commenting on this trend in *Theater der Zeit*, Dieter Kranz admonished that “Wagner interpretation in the German Democratic Republic needs to transcend the style of the new Bayreuth festival,” which, he maintained, failed to grasp the sociopolitical relevance of Wagner’s dramas. The problem in the GDR, as

<sup>61</sup> Hans Mayer, “Richard Wagners geistige Entwicklung,” *Sinn und Form* 5 (1953): 111–62, here 114.

<sup>62</sup> Walther Siegmund-Schultze, “Richard Wagners Musik in ihrer Bedeutung für unsere Zeit,” in *Richard Wagner Festwochen 1955*, quoted in Eckert, *Der Ring der Nibelungen*, 194–95.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>64</sup> Gerard Dippel, in *Sonntag*, 30 May 1954, quoted in Eckert, *Der Ring der Nibelungen*, 196.

<sup>65</sup> Seiferth describes him as “a highly qualified set designer with a lot of imagination and a perceptible link to the ideas and visions of Wieland Wagner” (“Wagner-Pflege,” 99).

<sup>66</sup> He is described by *The Musical Times* critic R. R. as an “unexceptional Loge” in a review of the 1952 production (*The Musical Times* 93, 1316 [1952]: 463).

he saw it, was that instead of making a genuine effort to develop “a scientifically based conception” for works such as *Lohengrin*, the *Ring*, and *Tristan*, directors were turning to “stylized scenery” in an attempt to “conform to the so-called ‘modern artistic sensibility.’”<sup>67</sup> This turn of events served not only to blur the crucial distinction between Eastern and Western readings of Wagner; the introduction of Bayreuth-style techniques exposed the ideological inconsistencies in the operas themselves. Wieland Wagner’s practice of reducing the works to their fundamental essence brought to the fore those mystical and Schopenhauerian qualities that were irreconcilable with the aesthetics of Socialist Realism. As a detractor of the composer noted in *Theater der Zeit*: “Wagner depicts for us no genuine people, instead only mythologies on two legs (Neu-Bayreuth lets the cat out of the bag there).”<sup>68</sup>

The ramifications of the GDR’s increasingly westernized Wagner productions were compounded by the changing political climate. As the foundations of the state became more secure and the possibility of German reunification receded, the role of Wagner came under scrutiny. This manifested itself particularly in the growing ambivalence toward the *Richard-Wagner-Festwoche*, the propagandistic merits of which were increasingly unclear.<sup>69</sup> Kranz, in his abovementioned article, a review of the *Festwoche*’s 1958 *Ring* production, urged that Bodenstein be dissuaded from his “foolish ambitions to turn the theater into a type of ‘Super Bayreuth’ for the GDR.”<sup>70</sup> Far more appropriate, he advised, would be a shorter festival in which the focus was on the works conceived in Wagner’s realist period. This call for a more critical reception of Wagner was by no means an isolated one. Heinz Bär’s “Wahllose Wagnerei,” published in the same issue of *Theater der Zeit*,<sup>71</sup> and a vitriolic review by Erika Wilde of Witte’s new *Lohengrin* production at the Staatsoper, published in the following issue,<sup>72</sup> expounded in far greater depth on the topic, controversially demanding that Wagner’s more dubious operas be eliminated altogether from the socialist canon.

Bär and Wilde sparked a heated debate in *Theater der Zeit* that spanned over six months. Carefully orchestrated, the debate was a very public attempt to reassess Wagner’s role in the GDR.<sup>73</sup> The editorial in the October issue

<sup>67</sup> Kranz, “Festspielhaus oder sozialistisches Theater?” 17.

<sup>68</sup> P. Witzmann, “Tönende Vorhalle des Faschismus,” *TdZ* 13, 11 (1958): 26–27, here 26.

<sup>69</sup> As Kröplin observes, the reopening of the more centrally located opera houses in Berlin and Leipzig, in 1955 and 1960 respectively, also raised questions about the viability of Dessau (“Aufhaltsame Ankunft und ahnungsvoller Abschied,” 80).

<sup>70</sup> Kranz, “Festspielhaus oder sozialistisches Theater?” 20.

<sup>71</sup> Heinz Bär, “Wahllose Wagnerei,” *TdZ* 13, 7 (1958): 20–22.

<sup>72</sup> Erika Witte, “Der Mystische Gral Deutscher Kunst: *Lohengrin* von Richard Wagner in der Staatsoper Berlin,” *TdZ*, 13, 8 (1958): 34–37.

<sup>73</sup> The editorial explains: “The editors admit that we wanted [a discussion] and therefore made no suggestions to Frau Wilde to tone down the text” (“Wagner und kein Ende! Wagner—erst der Anfang!” *TdZ* 13, 10 [1958]: 36). Notably, this was not the first discussion

tellingly announced: "Richard Wagner? Nothing is clear, we stand just at the beginning of a new contemporary evaluation!"<sup>74</sup> The timing of the debate was crucial, coming in the aftermath of Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin in his Secret Speech of February 1956 and the Hungarian revolution later that year. The revolution put paid to the open intellectual culture that de-Stalinization initially promised.<sup>75</sup> Yet, with Lukács now vilified as a revisionist following his role in the Nagy government and his most prominent supporters sidelined, a rare opportunity emerged to redefine the role and construction of the socialist canon.<sup>76</sup> The *Theater der Zeit* exchange provided a platform for this discussion and reflected the changing orientation of accepted readings of Marxist-Leninist thought in the GDR.

Lukács's essentially liberal interpretation of the humanistic canon had long perturbed the GDR's more utopian Communists. Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Bloch had both questioned his narrative of the past in the 1930s. Bloch, who was skeptical of Lukács's division of the past into clear-cut progressive and reactionary strands, asked: "is there no dialectical relationship between decline and ascent? Does even the confused, immature, and incomprehensible material automatically belong, in all cases, to bourgeois decadence? Can it not also—contrary to this simplistic, surely not revolutionary opinion—belong to the transition from the old world into the new?"<sup>77</sup> Brecht questioned the validity of appropriating a bourgeois canon for the working classes and took issue with Lukács's preference for the old over the new, remarking: "There is no way back. It's a matter not of the good old but the bad new."<sup>78</sup> Later, as Lukács's aesthetics took hold in the GDR, the associated Soviet practice of elevating "positive" historical figures found a harsh

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about the relevance of Wagner in the GDR press, but it was by far the most thorough and wide-ranging. Kröplin outlines the less consequential discussion that played out around his 70th anniversary in 1953 in "Aufhaltsame Ankunft und ahnungsvoller Abschied," 88–89.

<sup>74</sup> "Wagner und kein Ende! Wagner—erst der Anfang!" 36.

<sup>75</sup> For an overview of the impact of these events on the intellectual culture of the period, see John C. Torpey, *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 40–56; and John Rodden, *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of Eastern German Education, 1945–1995* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63–110.

<sup>76</sup> Becher was frozen out of GDR politics while Wolfgang Harich was scapegoated and sentenced to ten years in prison; see Alexander Stephan, "Johannes R. Becher and the Cultural Development of the GDR," trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 2 (Spring 1974): 72–89.

<sup>77</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Discussions of Expressionism" (1938), in *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 247.

<sup>78</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "Die Essays von Georg Lukács," *Gesammelte Werke*, 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 298, translated in Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Lunn provides a good account of the different strands of cultural thought inherent in Marxism. See also Werner Mittenzwei, "Marxismus und Realismus: Die Brecht–

critic in Hanns Eisler, who expressed concerns about the propagandistic use made of the cultural heritage by the SED. On reading the SED's declaration in 1952 to celebrate Beethoven's 125th anniversary, he complained that the "Marxist method must ... not carve, as it were, historical stages or historical personalities according to the daily requirement, but that it [must] interpret them in all their complexities and contradictions, as 'uncomfortable' as that may be."<sup>79</sup>

Such concerns had no place on the political agenda of the early 1950s, and Eisler notably came to blows with the SED in 1953 over the "false" concept of history espoused in his libretto *Johannes Faustus*, which explored the *deutsche Misere* reading of the past favored by Brecht and Abusch.<sup>80</sup> That the SED was not comfortable with alternative narratives of German history at this stage owed much to the drive for national unity and the need to win over the bourgeois intelligentsia. Its reluctance to consider wider discourses on the relationship between communism and historical tradition also reflected the fact that the majority of those who questioned the SED's Lukács-based narrative of the past had spent the war years in exile in the United States or Mexico. The inner circle of the SED, which consisted predominantly of Moscow exiles, viewed those returning from the West to the GDR with considerable suspicion. Any deviation from the party line was held as evidence of Western contamination, and returning émigrés were frequently subjected to accusations of cosmopolitanism.<sup>81</sup> Notable here is the acrimony that surrounded Brecht and Paul Dessau's *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* of 1951.<sup>82</sup>

Lukács Debate," *Das Argument*, no. 46 (March 1968): 12–43; and Mittenzwei, <<added: correct?>> "Bertolt Brecht: Against Georg Lukács," *New Left Review* 1, 84 (1974): 33–53.

<sup>79</sup> Hanns Eisler, "Bemerkungen zum Entwurf eines Beschlusses des ZK der SED zum 125: Todestag Ludwig van Beethovens," *Hanns Eisler: Gesammelte Werke*, Serie III, Schriften und Dokumente, 2: *Musik und Politik: Schriften 1948–1962*, ed. Günter Mayer (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1982), 195. <<Does Serie III, etc., refer to part of the *Gesammelte Werke* or separate series information (which we normally don't list)?>>

<sup>80</sup> See Peter Davies, "Hanns Eisler's 'Faustus' Libretto and the Problem of East German National Identity," *Music and Letters* 81, 4 (2000): 585–98; and Hans Bunge, ed., *Die Debatte um Hanns Eislers "Johann Faustus": Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Basis Druck, 1991). The *Misere* theory, which found its clearest expression in Abusch's *Irrweg einer Nation: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der deutschen Geschichte* (Berlin: publisher?, 1946), depicts German history as a series of negative events that rendered the rise of National Socialism inevitable and blocked the path of Marxism. Abusch later retracted these ideas and shifted his allegiance to the party-line interpretation of the past.

<sup>81</sup> Herf provides an extensive and illuminating discussion of this phenomenon in chapters 4 and 5 of his *Divided Memory*.

<sup>82</sup> See Joachim Lucchesi, *Das Verhör in der Oper: Die Debatte um die Aufführung "Das Verhör des Lukullus" von Bertolt Brecht und Paul Dessau* (Berlin: Basis Druck, 1993); and Joy Haslam Calico, "The Trial, the Condemnation, the Cover-Up: Behind the Scenes of Brecht/Dessau's *Lucullus* Opera(s)," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14, 3 (2002): 313–42. The negative reception accorded to Eisler's *Johannes Faustus* can also be read in this context; see Calico, "The Trial, the Condemnation, the Cover-Up," 316.

With the change of the guard in cultural politics after the mid-1950s, however, there was a marked shift in attitude; and the concerns of figures such as Brecht, Eisler, and Dessau regarding the social functions of the cultural heritage began to infiltrate and impact on public debates. In this context, the Wagner altercation in *Theater der Zeit* had implications far beyond its immediate subject. As Heinz Bär observed, the discussion was “not a matter of a fencing or boxing match between Wagnerians and anti-Wagnerians,” but centered on the much more fundamental issue of the basic makeup of the socialist canon.<sup>83</sup>

In this context Bär raised some particularly thorny issues, deconstructing the Janus-head image of Wagner and casting doubt on his right to a place in the canon. Critical of the blinkered zealotry with which the progressive elements of Wagner’s biography were trumpeted, Bär called for an examination of those biographical aspects that “make Wagner’s appraisal uncomfortable in our time.”<sup>84</sup> He dismissed the notion that one could sidestep Wagner’s ideological issues by focusing exclusively on the music; on the contrary, he countered, the music, particularly in the case of the later operas, could not be separated from Wagner’s “world outlook.”<sup>85</sup> The *Ring*, he explained, cannot be recommended by socialists as “a drama of avarice, a capitalistic destruction of virtue. In truth, in the *Ring* the world plainly perishes.”<sup>86</sup> Consequently, he maintained, the opera was not reconcilable with dialectical materialism.<sup>87</sup> Bär similarly dispensed with *Parsifal*, *Tristan*, and *Lohengrin*, noting in the case of the latter that Lohengrin’s “never shall you ask me” call, his demand for unquestioning faithfulness from Elsa, “is the exact opposite of a dialectical investigation of the world.”<sup>88</sup> Most provocatively, Bär raised the unspeakable specter of fascism, claiming that the destructive qualities of Wagner’s operas, “the mystical distortion of reality” and so on, were conducive to misappropriation, and it was no coincidence that Wagner had been Hitler’s favorite composer.<sup>89</sup>

Bär and Wilde’s call to remove Wagner’s less salubrious operas from the canon unsurprisingly provoked outrage among staunch Wagnerians. Wilde’s conclusion that *Lohengrin* had no relevance for the people of the GDR met with much derision from Ernst Krause, who dismissed her arguments as “ideological hammering” and invoked the queues of “working-class opera lovers, many students and youths” at the premiere of Witte’s production as

<sup>83</sup> Heinz Bär, “Zwischenbemerkung,” *TdZ* 13, 12 (1958): 14–16, here 14.

<sup>84</sup> Bär, “Wahllose Wagnererei?” 21.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

evidence of the opera's ever-present power.<sup>90</sup> This point was brought more forcefully to bear by Eduard Plate, professor at the Dresden Akademie für Musik und Theater, who praised the "healthy instincts" of the GDR's opera-loving youths and observed: "the tickets for the three performances [of *Lohengrin*] in Berlin were sold out within two hours. And the auditorium of the Berlin Staatsoper, as is generally known, is very big! Those who are 'finished' with Richard Wagner, such as Beckmesser, Eduard Hanslick, Erika Wilde, and Walther Victor, can avoid him."<sup>91</sup> Such arguments had little impact on Wagner's detractors. To reports of the popularity of *Lohengrin*, Erika Wilde retorted: "as if the value of a work could be read from the ticket sales!"<sup>92</sup> Arguments in support of Wagner's artistic merits met with a similar response: Paul Dessau declared that it was not Wagner's genius that was at issue; at issue was whether his genius had relevance for the GDR in political terms. Dessau concluded that it did not.<sup>93</sup>

The arguments of the anti-Wagner deliberation hinged on the role that the canon should play in a socialist society. Bär criticized its relegation to that of a "museum," serving only to house old works indiscriminately with no regard to their ideological value.<sup>94</sup> Dessau followed this line of thought and stressed that the socialist heritage should be an educatory one. It should inspire "rational reflection."<sup>95</sup> As far as he was concerned, Wagner's more problematic operas were incapable of achieving the latter, for as he explained, "the work of Wagner is filled with poisonous intoxication."<sup>96</sup> The reference to intoxication music or *Rauschmusik* was a loaded one. Used widely in the GDR to describe the excesses associated with the reactionary Western tradition, it placed Wagner firmly in the realm of the imperialist fascists. The danger that his *Rauschmusik* posed for the GDR's opera-going youth was brought to bear in two letters purported by the editors of *Theater der Zeit* to have been sent by "semi-anonymous" fascists, a G. Psylander and a Prof. Dr. A. Gerold.<sup>97</sup> The first of these correspondents, who responded to Erika Wilde's assault on *Lohengrin* by questioning her Germanness, caused particular concern for

<sup>90</sup> Ernst Krause, "So Nicht!" *TdZ* 13, 10 (1958): 37–39, here 38.

<sup>91</sup> Eduard Plate, "Wagner: Wunder, Wirklichkeitsentzogen. Eine Zuschrift aus Dresden," *TdZ* 13, 12 (1958): 13–14, here 14. A short letter by the writer Walther Victor emphatically supporting Erika Wilde had been published in the October edition of *Theater der Zeit*.

<sup>92</sup> Erika Wilde, "Die Wunde ist's, die nie sich schliesst," *TdZ* 14, 1 (1959): 10–11, here 10.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Dessau, "Musik der Gründerjahre: Ein Interview," *TdZ* 13, 12 (1958): 19–20.

<sup>94</sup> Bär, "Wahllose Wagnerei?" 22.

<sup>95</sup> Dessau, "Musik der Gründerjahre," 20.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Psylander's letter appeared in the October installment and Gerold's in the November issue of vol. 13 (1958). According to the editors, contact details were provided for neither letter; see *TdZ* 13, 10 (1958): 36.



Heinz Bär.<sup>98</sup> Bär revealed that Psylander had penned a second, unpublished letter to the journal in which he revealed himself not as a stalwart of the old guard but worryingly as a “young opera friend and Wagner fan ... who communicates the opinion of the wider circle of the Dresden theatergoers.”<sup>99</sup> The excerpts published by Bär exposed Psylander more as a critic of the SED than as a fascist.<sup>100</sup> No matter, he was steadfastly held aloft as evidence of the damage the uncritical reception of Wagner had already inflicted on the 20-something generation. The operetta composer Herbert Kawan echoed Bär’s fears. Thanking *Theater der Zeit* for alerting the public to such dangers, he noted that Wagner’s name still had fervid “brown” (i.e., Nazi) associations for such people.<sup>101</sup> Kawan concluded: “must we really let our youth first become intoxicated at the theater and then be re-educated through life? Would it not be easier the other way around?”<sup>102</sup>

The acknowledgment that Nazi sentiments were still prevalent in the GDR represented an aberration from the official anti-fascist rhetoric of the early 1950s, which offloaded the responsibility for and repercussions of German actions in the Third Reich onto the West. The contentious issues surrounding Wagner and antisemitism were given a decidedly wide berth in the early years of the GDR, a situation undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the Jewish question had no role to play in anti-fascist rhetoric.<sup>103</sup> In fact, the sidelining of Communists who had spent the war years in the West had decidedly antisemitic undertones; as Jeffrey Herf convincingly demonstrates, Jews and the cosmopolitan West were frequently considered to be synonymous.<sup>104</sup> This is a mindset that is apparent in early readings of *Die Meistersinger*. Within the opera, the foreign threat is manifest in the shape of Sixtus Beckmesser, who in the GDR was held as a masterful depiction of the Western Other, a deceitful cultural barbarian obsessed with formalistic rules and incapable of understanding German music. According to Stephan Stompor, writing in *Musik und Gesellschaft* in 1953:

<sup>98</sup> G. Psylander, “Einer der ‘vergass’ seine Anschrift exakt anzugeben,” *TdZ* 13, 10 (1958): 36–37, here 36.

<sup>99</sup> Heinz Bär, “Zwischenbemerkung,” *TdZ* 13, 12 (1958): 14–16, here 14.

<sup>100</sup> Bär quotes the following excerpt from Psylander: “In your opinion, all Wagner’s works that cannot be brought into direct compliance with the aims of the SED no longer have a place in our time” (ibid.).

<sup>101</sup> Herbert Kawan and Alfred Paul, “Gespräch mit einem Komponisten: Aufgezeichnet nach einer Tonbandaufnahme,” *TdZ* 13, 12 (1958): 16–17, here 17. Kawan’s use of the word “brown” is a reference to the brown shirts worn by the Nazi storm troopers (Sturmabteilung, or SA).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> The myth paraded the communist resistance as the primary victim of World War II; Jews, Gypsies, and other “passive” victims were simply subsumed under the generic title of “victims of fascism” (*Opfer des Faschismus*).

<sup>104</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 69–161.



Wagner embodies in him a malicious philistine who monitors compliance with formal and long-obsolete singing rules with painstaking exactness and wants in addition, through the power of his position of Marker, to get a troublesome rival off his back.<sup>105</sup> Typical petty-bourgeoisie characteristics, such as narrow-minded conservatism and [the] misuse of an official position, are exhibited in the shape of Beckmesser.<sup>106</sup>

Historically, the character of Beckmesser has been steeped in controversy. Theodor Adorno famously claimed with regard to Mime, Alberich, and Beckmesser that “all the rejects of Wagner’s works are caricatures of Jews.”<sup>107</sup> More recent studies by Barry Millington and David Levin make a convincing case that Beckmesser is strongly connected to 19th-century antisemitic stereotypes.<sup>108</sup> What is interesting here is that those characteristics of Beckmesser, which according to Millington can be traced back directly to Wagner’s characterization of the Jew in *Judaism in Music*—his small-mindedness, dishonesty, complete lack of musicality, and consequent inability to comprehend true German music in the shape of Walther’s song—mirror those attributed by Stompor to Beckmesser’s bourgeois status.<sup>109</sup> Millington describes the shrieking and bizarre coloratura effects of Beckmesser’s “Serenade” as a parody of the Jewish cantorial style and explains the unusually high tessitura of the part as yet another caricature of Jewish stereotypes.<sup>110</sup> Stompor similarly highlights these effects, noting in particular the exposed high tessitura, “through which Beckmesser’s speeches appear particularly disagreeable and peevish.” For him, however, these negative features serve to ensure “a pointed emphasis on social conflicts, in particular the struggle between progressive and reactionary forces.”<sup>111</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Beckmesser’s job in the singing competition is to “mark” the mistakes each competitor makes on a board.

<sup>106</sup> Stephan Stompor, “Musikalische Überbetonung und Zuspitzung in der deutschen Oper von Mozart bis Wagner,” *MuG* 3, 6 (1953): 248–53, here 252.

<sup>107</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone as *In Search of Wagner* (London: New Left Books, 1981), 23. Not everyone agrees with Adorno. See, for example, Hans Rudolf Vaget, “Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and Mr. Rose: Merkwürd’ger Fall!” *German Quarterly* 66, 2 (1993): 222–36; and Vaget, “‘Du warst mein Feind von je’: The Beckmesser Controversy Revisited,” in *Wagner’s Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 190–208.

<sup>108</sup> Barry Millington, “Nuremberg Trial: Is There Anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*?” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3, 3 (1991): 247–60; and David J. Levin, “Reading Beckmesser Reading: Antisemitism and Aesthetic Practice in *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*,” *New German Critique* 69 (1996): 127–46.

<sup>109</sup> Millington, “Nuremberg Trial,” 250–51.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 251–54.

<sup>111</sup> Stompor, “Musikalische Überbetonung und Zuspitzung in der deutschen Oper von Mozart bis Wagner,” 252.

The retreat from the open antisemitism of the early 1950s,<sup>112</sup> and the acceptance of Jewish composers such as Eisler and Dessau into the upper echelons of the GDR's cultural brigade, called for an acknowledgment of the more difficult aspects of Wagner's legacy,<sup>113</sup> particularly given the repeated emphasis in the *Theater der Zeit* debate on the dangers of the extreme elements of the "Wagner cult."<sup>114</sup> Conspicuous in this context is the inclusion by *Theater der Zeit* of the blatantly antisemitic comments of the second "fascist" correspondent, Prof. Dr. A. Gerold, who dismisses Wilde's judgment on Lohengrin as typifying a "specific renowned Jewish style."<sup>115</sup> Thus, when the *Theater der Zeit* debate came to a close in the January issue of 1959, the upper hand appeared to be with Wagner's opponents. Their pinpointing of his reactionary tendencies as a problem directly affecting the GDR rather than one confined to the West rendered him politically unpalatable. Although Wagner continued to be performed,<sup>116</sup> there was a noticeable hiatus on new productions of his works in the Berlin Staatsoper,<sup>117</sup> and the festival at Dessau gradually came to a standstill.<sup>118</sup> Even though this reading of Wagner had certain long-term implications for his reception, the GDR was by no means "finished" with him. Eisler notably remarked with chagrin in 1961: "with displeasure I hear that opera houses playing only Wagner are also sold out."<sup>119</sup> Wagner's appeal with the public was still significant; and consequently in

<sup>112</sup> The changing climate was marked by the release of the most prominent victim of the antisemitic purges, the politician Paul Merker, from prison in the summer of 1956; see Herf, *Divided Memory*, 154–55.

<sup>113</sup> Notably in Joachim Herz's 1960 Leipzig production of *Die Meistersinger*, Beckmesser was granted clemency. Herz diminished the level of ridicule associated with his prize-song rendition by combining Walther's words with the melody of Beckmesser's Act II serenade. He also redeemed the character by effecting a reconciliation between him and Sachs at the end of the opera, a ploy that met with stringent opposition from the Leipzig critic Werner Wolf. See Werner Wolf, "Das Musiktheater und die Leipzig *Meistersinger*," *MuG* 11, 1 (1961): 33–37; and Joachim Herz, "Musik und Szene in den *Meistersingern*," *MuG* 11, 3 (1961): 157–62. David Levin uses the analogy of "ghettoization" to describe Beckmesser's banishment from the stage and exclusion from the newly strengthened Germanic community at the end of *Die Meistersinger* ("Reading Beckmesser Reading," 144–46).

<sup>114</sup> See, in particular, Fritz Erpenbeck, "Statt eines Schlussworts," *TdZ* 1 (1959): 13–16.

<sup>115</sup> Prof. Dr. A. Gerold, "Ein Schmutzfink aus dem Hinterhalt," *TdZ*, 13, 11 (1958): 22.

<sup>116</sup> Kupfer's database documents seven new productions of Wagner in 1959 in the GDR, including one of *Lohengrin* in Rostock and *Tristan* in Leipzig.

<sup>117</sup> Kupfer demonstrates a four-year gap between Witte's *Lohengrin* and the Staatsoper's next Wagner contribution, a production of *Tannhäuser* (directed by Erich-Alexander Winds) that premiered on 3 October 1962.

<sup>118</sup> Seiferth notes that the festivals of 1959 and 1960 were confined to eight performances each. The next festival did not take place until 1963; and a final performance of the *Ring* spread over a month occurred in 1965 ("Wagner-Pflege," 101).

<sup>119</sup> Hanns Eisler, "Ask Me More about Brecht: Conversations with Hans Bunge. Four Excerpts," *Hanns Eisler: A Miscellany*, ed. David Blake (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 422.

the early 1960s, with the impending anniversary of his 150th birthday, the government determined to reassess his position once again.

The reluctance of the government to relinquish the canon to ideological principles was not evident only in the case of Wagner. Typical was the response to Richard Petzoldt's article published in the pedagogical journal, *Musik in der Schule*, on the occasion of Mendelssohn's 150th birthday in 1959.<sup>120</sup> Petzoldt ascribed the failure of attempts to rejuvenate Mendelssohn's reputation fully in the wake of World War II to the fact that he was essentially a bourgeois composer whose relevance in a socialist society was questionable. The SED member Ernst Hermann Meyer condemned the article as "dangerous."<sup>121</sup> Hanns Eisler, speaking on behalf of the Akademie der Künste, described it as a "crass aberration of science and taste."<sup>122</sup> Minister for Culture Hans Pischner launched a direct attack on it in his speech at the opening of Mendelssohn's birthday celebrations, denouncing the article as vulgar socialism, a common response to unwanted ideological challenges.<sup>123</sup> Such charges had been levelled at Bär in the *Theater der Zeit* debate; René Svanda, for instance, dismissed his reasoning with the observation that "it is more dangerous and amiss to be pseudo-dialectical than undialectical."<sup>124</sup> The second assessment of Wagner, which took place in a very different post-Wall environment, notably involved a move away from dialectical thought, pseudo or otherwise, and a return to the more amenable image of him as a Janus head.

### Wagner's 150th Birthday

The initial plans drawn up for Wagner's 150th birthday by the section head of the Music Department in the Ministry for Culture, Hans-Georg Uszkoreit, envisaged grand-scale celebrations, including the publication of a complete edition of Wagner's letters, an autograph facsimile of the Wesendonck letters, and a collection of essays.<sup>125</sup> Keen once again to introduce Wagner to a wider audience, the ministry proposed selling records of his music at cut price and

<sup>120</sup> Richard Petzoldt, "Symbolik zweier Denkmäler: Zu Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdys 150. Geburtstag am 3. Februar 1959," *Musik in der Schule* 10, 1 (1959): 11–17.

<sup>121</sup> Letter from Meyer to Alfred Kurella of the Central Committee of the SED (26 January 1959), SAPMO-BA DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105.

<sup>122</sup> Eisler's opinions are expressed in a document he prepared on behalf of the Akademie for publication in *Neues Deutschland*. The document is attached to a letter from Eisler to Kurella (9 February 1959), SAPMO-BA DY 30/IV 2/2.026/105.

<sup>123</sup> Prof. Hans Pischner, "Festrede zur Eröffnung der Mendelssohn-Bartholdy-Gedenkwoch in Leipzig," *Musik in der Schule* 10, 3 (1959): 108–16 and 125–26.

<sup>124</sup> René Svanda, "Eine Stimme aus Freundesland," *TdZ* 13, 10 (1958): 41–43, here 42.

<sup>125</sup> "1. Konzeption für die Wagner-Ehrung 1963" (October/November 1961), prepared by Hans-Georg Uszkoreit, BA DR 1/73, 4.

the publication of suitable articles in the newspapers.<sup>126</sup> Notably, the East–West polarities also returned to dominate discussions as the GDR resumed its role as keeper of Wagner’s heritage. A statement by Culture Minister Hans Bentzien highlighted the “leading role of the German Democratic Republic for all of Germany,” explaining that “while in the German Democratic Republic, a genuinely creative, absorbing appropriation of Wagner’s work is taking place, this is suspended in West Germany as a result of the most varying clusters of interpretations ranging from reactionary mysticism to formalism.”<sup>127</sup>

In 1961, the Ministry for Culture charged the Central Institute for Musicological Research, a subsidiary of the VDK or Association of German Composers and Musicologists, with the establishment of a Wagner committee to formulate a suitable reading of the composer in preparation for his birthday.<sup>128</sup> The committee covered the spectrum of Wagner views within the GDR, including among its members Hanns Eisler; Georg Knepler; Ernst Hermann Meyer; the opera director Joachim Herz; the music critic and ardent Wagner enthusiast Werner Wolf; Harry Goldschmidt, head of the Central Institute for Musicological Research; Nathan Notowicz, leader of the VDK; Deputy Culture Minister Hans Pischner; and Hans-Georg Uszkoreit.<sup>129</sup> Goldschmidt convened the committee.<sup>130</sup> Knepler, the GDR’s pre-eminent 19th-century musicologist, was charged with the task of channeling the deliberations of the committee into a celebratory article that would form the bedrock of the 1963 festivities.<sup>131</sup> Uszkoreit served as the mediator between the committee and the Ministry for Culture, using the findings of the committee as a basis on which to draft a plan of action for ministry involvement in the birthday year.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>126</sup> “Hinweise und Empfehlungen für die Richard-Wagner-Ehrung 1963,” prepared by Deputy Culture Minister Kurt Bork, dated 7.1.1963 <<7 January 1963?>>, BA DR 1/74, 4.

<sup>127</sup> “Vorlage für die Ideologische Kommission beim Zentralkomitee der SED: Betr. Richard-Wagner-Ehrung 1963” (16 February 1963), BA DR 1/74, 3.

<sup>128</sup> Regarding the aims and establishment of the committee, see “1. Konzeption für die Wagner-Ehrung 1963,” and the committee meeting announcement of 3 February 1962, in the Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste (SA-AdK), VDK 589.

<sup>129</sup> A number of other members were co-opted along the way. For full details, see the minutes of the committee meetings, which are held in the Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste: SA-AdK, VDK 589. Further documents relating to the meetings can be found in BA DR 1/73–74 and SAPMO-BA DY 30/IV 2/9.06/295.

<sup>130</sup> SA-AdK, VDK 589.

<sup>131</sup> See the correspondence in SA-AdK, VDK 589. Drafts of Knepler’s “Wagner-Ehrung 1963” can be found in SAPMO-BA DY 30/IV 2/9.06/295, 20, and SA-AdK VDK 589. The statement was published in *MuG* 12, 11 (1962): 681–83; and *Richard Wagner, 1813–1883* ([East] Berlin: Deutscher Kulturbund, 1963): 5–9. All later references are to the Kulturbund edition.

<sup>132</sup> His reports are filed in BA DR 1/73–74.

The committee's main task was to attempt, yet again, to reconcile Wagner with the conflicting demands of socialist ideology and national legitimization, and with this goal in mind, the committee established twelve problem areas for discussion, many of which had been highlighted during the *Theater der Zeit* debate:

- I. Wagner in his time
- II. Social and ideological contradictions in his work
- III. Wagner's relationship to tradition
- IV. Philosophy
- V. Spoken theater
- VI. Opera
- VII. Instrumental music
- VIII. Individual studies
- IX. Wagner and Beethoven
- X. Wagner and Bach
- XI. Wagner and music theater
- XII. Tristan
- XIII. Parsifal
- XIV. Is there a coherency in Wagner's works?
- XV. Bayreuth after Wagner's death
- XVI. Can his works be separated from the Wagner cult?
- XVII. Contemporary relevance—positive and negative—of his work
- XVIII. Does the argument of intoxicating art (*Rauschkunst*) hold against Wagner?
- XIX. Is Wagner only valued by musicians?
- XX. Was Wagner a precursor of Hitler or not?
- XXI. From which standpoint should the preservation of Wagner be guided in a country that is constructing socialism?<sup>133</sup>

The issue highlighted repeatedly in committee discussions was the extent of the contradictions in Wagner's work. Socialist realist art was supposed to reflect, and have meaning for, society. This demanded a level of ideological consistency in the message contained in the body of works. As Knepler noted elsewhere in a comparison of *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Die Meistersinger*, "*Tristan* teaches us that there is only one happiness: ... obliteration in night, ... closure in oblivion. If that were so, then *Die Meistersinger* would be unintelligible."<sup>134</sup> The main objective of the committee was not, however, to provide a rigorous ideological critique of the composer but to render an acceptable narrative that could be used for propagandistic purposes. His involvement in the 1849 uprising in Dresden and his writings on the democracy

<sup>133</sup> SA-AdK, VDK 589.

<sup>134</sup> Knepler, *Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2: 863.

of art represented the focus of much of the coverage, providing vindication for his early operas. In a draft for a committee *Festrede*, Knepler noted that when Wagner wrote *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*, “an optimistic worldview within the framework of the bourgeoisie world was still possible, even though great intellectual difficulties were involved.”<sup>135</sup> The initial 1848 draft of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was hailed as a critique of capitalism. Knepler interpreted Wagner’s depiction of injustice clinging to the gods due to their acquisition of power through violence and cunning as a metaphor for the fate of the bourgeoisie, to whom “the injustice of exploitation clings.”<sup>136</sup>

Despite *Lohengrin*’s return to the fold, the calls in *Theater der Zeit* for a critical appropriation of Wagner’s works had had a lasting impact. The committee interpreted the 1848 Revolution as a watershed in Wagner’s oeuvre, deeming the works that followed, with the exception of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, which was considered a happy aberration, to be ideologically problematic. The “Directions and Recommendations for the Richard-Wagner-Celebrations 1963,” prepared in January 1963 by Kurt Bork, head of the government’s Department of Performing Arts, explained:

This contradictory attitude of Wagner is reflected clearly in his works. Already in the *Ring*, but especially in *Tristan* and *Parsival* [*sic*], we find mystical and world-denying traits that have their cause in the hopelessness of the bourgeois people of this time. Such traits are essentially alien to his music dramas of the prerevolutionary period, and they also do not appear in the *Meistersinger*, dating from 1867.<sup>137</sup>

The possibility that a genuine East–West divide existed in Wagner’s works was mooted by the committee, who observed that Wieland Wagner’s production style was most effective with *Parsifal*, the least ideologically sound of the operas, and least effective with *Die Meistersinger*.<sup>138</sup> Yet the committee was not yet ready to relinquish any of Wagner’s works. The guidelines prepared for the Ministry for Culture by Uszkoreit emphasized that “everything of Wagner’s is performable.” He acknowledged that “*Tristan und*

<sup>135</sup> Georg Knepler, “Festrede zu Richard Wagners 150. Geburtstag,” SA-AdK VDK 589, 2.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 2–3. Knepler is referring to the following lines from Wagner’s 1848 draft of the Nibelung myth: “Yet the peace by which they have arrived at mastery does not repose on reconciliation: by violence and cunning was it wrought. The object of their higher ordering of the world is moral consciousness, but the wrong they fight attaches to themselves” (“Der Nibelungen-Mythus als Entwurf zu einem Drama,” in Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1892–99], 7: 302).

<sup>137</sup> “Hinweise und Empfehlungen für die Richard-Wagner-Ehrung 1963” (7 January 1963), prepared by Kurt Bork, BA DR 1/74.

<sup>138</sup> “Protokoll des Wagner-Kolloquiums am 4.11.1961,” SA-AdK, VDK 589.

*Isolde* and *Parsifal* raise larger problems,” and suggested that to counteract these, “*Parsifal* in particular should be performed by one of the most capable opera houses with the best artists.”<sup>139</sup> Similarly, it is noteworthy that the committee did not demand a whitewash of those aspects of Wagner that did not sit comfortably with socialist ideology. On the contrary, the statement put together by Knepler stressed the need to understand *all* aspects of Wagner’s character and art. “Hitler fascism” and later “reactionary circles” misunderstood and misappropriated Wagner precisely because they failed to comprehend the totality of his music and ideology. They focused only on the negative characteristics in what amounted to “a corruption of the oeuvre.”<sup>140</sup> To counteract this, the committee painted Wagner as a socialist realist composer. The contradictions in his work existed because he was a man of his time who responded musically to the problems and conflicts inherent in his society.<sup>141</sup> Knepler declared:

Wagner’s work is first of all a mirror of the German intelligentsia of the previous century with its ambitious ideals and hopes but also with its deep-seated pessimism and its incapacity to grasp the developmental trends of the time. From the world of sagas and legends, from the German enchanted forest, we encounter the bourgeois person of the last century. A good part of the effect of the Wagnerian music drama is to be ascribed to the fact that it takes as its basis conflicts that are also unresolved in the bourgeois world of today.<sup>142</sup>

Yet again Wagner was held up as a mirror of the German nation. This reading, however, portrayed him not as a metaphor for the current East–West divide but as its historical precedent. Wagner represented the bourgeois

<sup>139</sup> “1. Konzeption für die Wagner-Ehrung 1963,” 5. Uszkoreit questioned the possibility of a performance in Berlin’s Komische Oper or at the very least the procurement of Walter Felsenstein as a guest director for a performance. Felsenstein notably abstained from directing Wagner after the war, although he did invite Joachim Herz to direct *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Komische Oper in 1962. See Stephan Stompor, ed., *Walter Felsenstein, Joachim Herz: Musiktheater* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam, 1976), 404–10; and Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 315 and 323.

<sup>140</sup> Georg Knepler, “Zur Wagner-Ehrung 1963,” 8. This reading of Wagner reception in the West was not confined to the GDR and was also evident in the USSR. Rosamund Bartlett quotes from a review by I. Nestiev of Joachim Herz’s 1963 production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, published in *Trud* on 22 May 1963, in which he observes that “Wagner’s legacy is perceived in different ways in the West—bourgeois-idealist aesthetics fetishize the weak, reactionary sides of Wagner’s work and see him as forefather of contemporary modernism. Progressive musicians see in him a musician-innovator, a fighter for new mass art, calling for a revolutionary transformation of life” (*Wagner and Russia*, 7).

<sup>141</sup> Knepler, “Zur Wagner-Ehrung 1963,” 6.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*



German soul, a soul in which the progressive Self and the reactionary Other existed side by side, a soul that tenuously linked East and West.

The findings of the committee failed to convince the SED that Wagner was on a par with Beethoven or Handel as a cultural authority for the GDR. In a letter to Bork of 15 February 1963 concerning the final version of the mandate for the jubilee celebrations, Uszkoreit noted some last minute changes arising from an intervention by Peter Czerny from the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the SED. The party had decided to scale back the celebrations. The planned festival week would be replaced by a single ceremony and a colloquium. More important, the SED determined that the official significance of the celebrations should be reduced; a musicologist from the Wagner committee would now give the keynote speech instead of a representative from the government.<sup>143</sup> Yet the government's reluctance to endorse the festival openly did not diminish the discourse on Wagner, which had now come full circle in that the focus of Wagner reception returned to the stage. Among the publications issued to mark the 150th celebrations was a handbook by the Kulturbund, which offered source materials and suggestions for local-level celebrations, lectures, and discussions.<sup>144</sup> Pertinent in the handbook are the references to performance practices in which a new polarity emerges, that of Bayreuth and Leipzig: "Bayreuth and Leipzig, deep psychological abstraction and music-theater realism, these are the two poles of contemporary Wagner productions."<sup>145</sup>

The rise of the Leipzig opera house in the 1960s under the auspices of its director, Joachim Herz, represented a significant turning point in the GDR's Wagner reception. Notably, Herz provided a practical expression of the Wagner committee's emphasis on historical relevance. Central to the rise of Leipzig as a worthy opponent to Neu-Bayreuth was Herz's belief that the problems inherent in Wagner's work could be resolved only on the stage. In an essay of 1965 he observed, "it is the duty of scholarship to point out, explain and not conceal from us the contradictions in Wagner's worldview.... It must be the duty of the stage to judge [the worldview]."<sup>146</sup> Herz's approach to Wagner was significant on two counts. First, his production aesthetics

<sup>143</sup> BA DR 1/74. The official status of the festival had never been fully confirmed. In December 1961, VDK leader Notowicz had informed Goldschmidt, the convenor of the Wagner committee, that Culture Minister Bentzien would let the committee know in due course whether or not their final statement would be issued as an official declaration from the SED (SA-AdK, VDK 589 [letter of 6 December 1961]).

<sup>144</sup> *Richard Wagner, 1813–1883*. In addition to the article prepared by the Wagner committee, the handbook includes as source material for discussion a number of Wagner's own writings, including his "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven" of 1840 and his "Proposal for the Organization of a German National Theater for the Kingdom of Saxony" (1848).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>146</sup> "Richard Wagner und das Erbe—Möglichkeiten des Musiktheaters an einer Repertoirebühne," lecture given at the *Internationale Kolloquium des Internationalen*

were steeped in the realistic traditions of Brecht and Felsenstein and as such represented a third way forward for Wagner productions that avoided both the connotations of the naturalistic style favored in Dessau and the symbolism of Bayreuth.<sup>147</sup> Second, like Knepler, he was convinced that Wagner's works can be understood only in terms of their socio-historical context.<sup>148</sup> Such an understanding, Herz maintained, laid to rest many of the fears surrounding Wagner's operas. Presented in their true contexts, the works would not intoxicate audiences, "but would demonstrate to them how intoxicating circumstances can be brought about."<sup>149</sup> Significant in this regard is his production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, premiered in 1962 and turned into a film in 1964, which portrays the opera as a study of bourgeois constraints. The Dutchman is presented not as a mystical alternative to the mundane realities of everyday life but as a figment of Senta's dream world, a world in which the restrictions of her actual life with Eric do not evaporate but are heightened.<sup>150</sup> Lydia Goehr observes, "for Herz, a bourgeois society is populated by the living—or the already dead, embodied not only by the Dutchman and his crew ... but also by the women whose lives are confined to spinning wheels and spinning tales."<sup>151</sup> Accordingly, escape comes for Senta not in the form of the Dutchman, whose ties to fate mirror her own, but in turning her back on bourgeois society altogether and walking away from both Eric and the Dutchman.

Herz's historical reading of Wagner, also manifest in his interpretation of the *Ring* as a metaphor for the social implications of 19th-century capitalism,<sup>152</sup> offered an important way forward for Wagner reception in the GDR, assimilating many of the concerns that had been expressed in previous debates. His realistic and didactic approach rendered Wagner more palatable to those who had previously argued that the composer had no place in the socialist canon. Seiferth observes that "Herz proved that Wagner belonged to *our* heritage."<sup>153</sup> Ultimately, he marked the beginning of a new era in Wagner reception in the GDR. As the debates of the 1950s and 1960s subsided,

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*Theaterinstituts zum Thema "Zeitgenössische Opern-Interpretation,"* 6–11 November 1965, reprinted in *Joachim Herz: Theater—Kunst des erfüllten Augenblicks*, 129.

<sup>147</sup> Herz himself identified the three modes of staging Wagner's operas as "the illusionistic action stage," as espoused by Wagner; "the symbolistic dream stage" found in Bayreuth; and his own "realistic action stage" ("Richard Wagner und das Erbe," 129).

<sup>148</sup> See, in particular, his complaints about the unconvincing narratives brought about by Bayreuth's abstract productions (*ibid.*, 131).

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>150</sup> See *Joachim Herz: Theater—Kunst des erfüllten Augenblicks*, 102–7; and Felsenstein and Herz, *Musiktheater*, 212–22.

<sup>151</sup> Lydia Goehr, "Undoing the Discourse of Fate: The Case of *Der fliegende Holländer*," *Opera Quarterly* 21, 3 (2005): 430–51, here 448.

<sup>152</sup> Herz's production was staged in Leipzig between 1973 and 1976.

<sup>153</sup> Seiferth, "Wagner-Pflege in der DDR," 112.

so too did the need to read Wagner in terms of a national divide. For the new generation of opera directors, Herz, Ruth Berghaus, Götz Friedrich, and Harry Kupfer, the challenge was not to undermine or oppose the Wagner of Neu-Bayreuth but to create a Wagner who had relevance in both East and West.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Götz Friedrich brought *Tannhäuser* to Bayreuth in 1972, and Harry Kupfer *Der fliegende Holländer* in 1978. Berghaus made her mark on the West with her stagings of *Parsifal* (1982) and the *Ring* (1985–87) with the Frankfurt opera. See Dieter Kranz, ed., *Der Regisseur Harry Kupfer, "Ich muß Oper machen": Kritiken, Beschreibungen, Gespräche* ([East] Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1988); and Corinne Holtz, *Ruth Berghaus: Ein Porträt* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2005).